

**WHO/EHA**

**EMERGENCY HEALTH TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR AFRICA**

## **1. Overview**

### **1.9. Coping Mechanisms**

Panafrican Emergency Training Centre, Addis Ababa, July 1998

## **1.9. Coping Mechanisms Overhead Transparencies**

- 1.9.1. Coping, Working Definition
- 1.9.2. Coping, Definition from the dictionary.
- 1.9.3. Vulnerability and Capacity to Cope
- 1.9.4. Coping Strategies are Cultural
- 1.9.5. To Cope versus to Manage
- 1.9.6. Examples of Individual and Community Coping Mechanisms
- 1.9.7. Non-erosive versus Erosive
- 1.9.8. Three different kinds of Coping
- 1.9.9. Coping Mechanism and Emergency Management

## 1.9. Coping Mechanisms Trainers' Guide

Objective:

*To illustrate the definitions' main characteristics and main features of coping mechanisms. (Knowledge)*

Key-message:

*Coping mechanisms can save lives but they have human and social costs. Coping mechanisms are a spectrum of activities: one end of the spectrum represents the best example of solidarity, i.e. community self-help initiatives, etc, but the other end can also be called misery and/or low life, i.e. migration, begging, child labour, violence, prostitution, even selling organs can be a coping mechanism. Before relying on people's coping mechanisms, one should look at their social cost. Poor people cope, Rich people don't cope, they manage.*

### 1.9.1. Coping, Working definition

*Introduce. The concept of coping mechanisms and/or strategies is closely related to the idea of survival, and threat. It is a key concept of emergency management. This is a working definition. Ask if participants agree with the statement or if they have other ones. Ask for examples from the participants.*

### 1.9.2. Coping, Definition from the dictionary.

*Illustrate. Coping is a capacity, a capacity to RESPOND and to RECOVER from something stressful: e.g. a disaster.*

### 1.9.3. Vulnerability and Capacity to Cope

*Illustrate and discuss. Vulnerability and Capacity to Cope are the two facets of the same coin. The more one is vulnerable, the less one has the capacity to cope, the more one tends to adopt coping mechanisms. Vulnerability and capacity to cope recognise three sets of causes: infra-structural, i.e. age, sex, environment, demographic structure of the community, etc., structural, e.g. individual socio-economic status, services available to the community, etc., and super-structural, e.g. literacy/illiteracy, culture, beliefs, attitude of fatalism, etc.*

### 1.9.4. Coping Strategies are Cultural

*Discuss. There are no standards for coping strategies, they vary depending on, and are influenced by socio-cultural factors. E.g. some cultures have food taboo, irrespectively of their level of deprivation, certain societies may recur to violence more easily than others may. Be cautious before condemning practices that are*

*new to you. People can adopt new coping mechanisms on the basis of lessons learned in the past and these mechanisms can consolidate in what we call culture.*

#### 1.9.5. To Cope versus to Manage

*Discuss and ask for examples. If one knows how and has resources to manage, one does not need to cope. To cope implies very little control on the situation at hand.*

#### 1.9.6. Examples of Individual and Community Coping Mechanisms

*A list of examples. Before showing the transparency, ask for other examples of individual and community coping mechanisms. Discuss and clarify some of the examples.*

#### 1.9.7. Non-erosive versus Erosive

*Introduce. Coping mechanisms can be 'Erosive' or 'Non-erosive'.*

#### 1.9.8. Three different kinds of Coping

*Introduce, discuss the examples and ask for more. The same as resources, coping mechanisms are finite. There are three stages of coping. The first is called 'non-erosive', because it leaves behind little or no permanent damage. One step further down is erosive coping: permanent harm is done. In the last stage, coping has failed, and the door is open for destitution.*

#### 1.9.9. Coping Mechanism and Emergency Management

*Discuss. Before an emergency, it is useful to have an idea of the people's coping mechanisms. During the emergency they can be utilised as long as they are non-erosive: 'it is the affected community that will provide the first relief'. After an emergency, to work for rehabilitation implies supporting the people's coping mechanisms.*

*Stand-alone. Complementary to Lifelines (1.10.), Famine (3.5.), Complex Emergencies (4.1. and 4.2.), Community Participation (2.11.), Approaches to Disaster Management (1.2.).*

#### Essential Reading:

- Coping with Natural Disasters, the role of local health personnel and the community, WHO/IFRC, 1989
- Coping and Survival Mechanisms in the Context of Disaster Management, WHO/PTC, 1993

***Coping strategies or mechanisms***  
**are**

remedial actions undertaken by people  
whose survival and livelihood are  
compromised or threatened

1.9.2. Coping, Definition from the dictionary.

***Capacity to cope***  
***is*** the capacity  
to respond to, ***and to recover from***  
stressful events

***Vulnerability and capacity to cope  
are opposite facets of the same  
complex.***

*This complex* is made *of factors and stresses* that can be

- *infra-structural (i.e. biological, demographic and environmental)*
- *structural (i.e. social and economical)*
- *super-structural ( i.e. cultural and political) .*

#### 1.9.4. Coping Strategies are Cultural

Coping strategies vary  
by region, community,  
social group, household, gender, age,  
season and time in history.

They are deeply influenced by the people's  
previous experience.

## Coping Mechanisms

***To 'cope' implies much less control over a situation than to 'manage'.***

*Some examples of individual and  
community coping mechanisms*

Cooperatives  
(farming, saving, etc)

Loans  
Foraging of crisis food  
(roots, berries, etc)

Sale of household assets

Migration

Sales of Relief goods

Child labour

Prostitution

Theft

Violence

## Coping Mechanisms:

Non-erosive

Erosive

#### 1.9.8. Three different kinds of Coping

***Coping strategies are closely related to resources and assets and thus they are finite.***

When the last stage has been reached ***and they are overcome***, the damage is irreversible and total dependence from external ***assistance*** is the outcome.

#### **1st. Non-erosive Coping:**

insurance, risk-minimising, loss management.

Loans, reduction in dietary intake, cheaper foods, reduction of meals, sale of small stock and non-productive assets

#### **2nd. Erosive coping:**

disposal of productive assets.

Shark loans, sale of large livestock, land and tools. Bonded labour arrangements. Child labour

#### **3rd. Failed coping:**

destitution.

Dependancy on charity, out-migration. Prostitution, sale of children.

## Coping Mechanisms AND Emergency Management

### **Before an Emergency:**

- They must be researched
  - Strengthened
  - Monitored for early warning

### **During an Emergency:**

*'it is the individuals and the community that will provide the first relief ':*

- They must be utilized
  - protected
  - monitored & controlled

### **After an Emergency:**

*'it is the individuals and the community that will provide the first relief ':*

**supporting the people's coping mechanisms is the priority**